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The
Archives
of
Bexar

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Leslie C. Bayne

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THE ARCHIVES OF BEXAR.

[The following description of these papers was published in substance in the San Antonio Express, September 23, 1898.]

By vote of the Commissioners' Court of Bexar county, the University of Texas has just come into possession of one of the great historical treasures of the American continent. This large collection of documents, almost all in manuscript, is popularly known as the Spanish archives; but the official title which it bore while Texas was a part of the Republic of Mexico was the Archives of Bexar. The term Bexar, when used in this connection, has reference to the Department of Bexar, which extended over nearly all of the present State of Texas.

The collection is a very large one; 300,000 pages would be a low estimate, and perhaps 400,000 would not far exceed the truth. About one-fourth of the documents are written on foolscap paper, and the remainder on paper half that size, all with a very wide margin. The penmanship in most cases is good and easily legible; often it is beautifully regular, and in certain letters and reports written between 1780 and 1800 it approaches the perfect clearness of engraving. The oldest document that has come under my notice bears the date 1734, though very probably there are others of earlier date; the last papers are those which contain the correspondence of General Cos, and were written in the latter half of 1834 and extend to November, 1835.

The Spanish occupation of Texas is inseparably connected with the French occupation of Louisiana. The founding of the missions around Nacogdoches and San Antonio is but a chapter in the history of the conflict between France and Spain for the possession of the country west of the Red river. Spain's first attempt at occupation, which was occasioned by the landing of the French LaSalle on the shores of Matagorda Bay, proved a complete failure, and in a few years Texas was again an uncivilized wilderness. Then Louisiana fell under the control of a commercial company that was more interested in opening a contraband trade with Mexico than in defending its sovereign's title to the vast wilderness to the west; under the auspices of this company, another Frenchman, whom we know in

Texas history as Saint-Denis, aroused Spanish jealousy by penetrating the forbidden country. But he told such tales of the willingness of the French to yield the disputed territory, and of their desire to open trade with Mexico, that the Spanish authorities resolved to seize the opportunity to take possession; and thus it was that, under the guidance of Saint-Denis, and with the tacit consent of his superiors in Louisiana, the missions and forts around Nacogdoches and San Antonio came into existence during the years immediately following 1716. This was the beginning of the permanent occupation of Texas.

The French soon became hostile again, and from this time to 1763 the theme of greatest interest in Texas history is the attempt of the French to drive out the Spanish, and, on the other hand, the persevering endeavors of the Spanish to hold the country by civilizing and Christianizing the native tribes. Such was the political and humanitarian use made of the missions.

A frontier settlement which joined an unfriendly neighbor needed a government of its own, so in 1727 Texas was constituted a separate province. San Antonio was made its capital, and, but for one or two brief intervals, remained so until Texas became a Republic. All the official business of the few settlements was managed by the governor of the province, who was also military commandant, and thus began the accumulation of papers which we now call the Archives of Bexar.

When Mexico gained its independence the province of Texas became the Department of Bexar, which still included nearly all the territory of the present State, and was at that time one of the administrative units of the State of Coahuila and Texas. The size of this department was not diminished until a very few years before our revolution, the district of Nacogdoches being set off in 1831 and that of Brazos in 1834. So we can say with a near approach to the truth that all the business of government relative to Texas between the dates 1727 and 1835 was carried on from San Antonio, and is recorded in these papers.

The capital of Mexican Texas was never permanently removed from San Antonio, and as the capital of American Texas was never located there, the collection did not become a part of the archives of the Republic, and so was allowed to pass into the possession of the county of Bexar.

It would be an endless task, even if one possessed the information, to enumerate the events and subjects mentioned in these papers. Here reposes the history of Texas to 1835,—the complete story of the rise, rule and fall of the Spanish power between the Sabine and the Rio Grande; the voluminous details of the ceaseless war against hostile tribes, with innumerable tales of thrilling incident and tragic horror; the Spanish account of the long struggle with the French; the record of the unselfish toiling of patient missionaries; the Spanish version of the quarrel between the United States and Spain; the wild story of the Mexican revolution, so intimately connected with Magee and Long; reports from the neutral ground of the gathering of turbulent crowds around Nacogdoches; and finally, the coming of the Anglo-American, the building up of the settlements, and the Revolution. That these questions and many others are all treated is certain; how fully they are treated can be determined only by patient investigation.

Our historians have, as a rule, ignored this most important source of information. Probably not one-twentieth of these documents have been studied by the men who have written our books. As a result much that now passes for Texas history must be thrown into the fire when the contents of this collection are fully understood, and many a page of absorbing story will be added to enrich a history already intensely interesting, and floods of light will be let in to clear up much that is now doubtful and obscure.

For the sake of greater clearness it may be well to call attention to a few of the documents of this collection. I do not mean to say, however, that those mentioned below are more important than hundreds of others that cannot be included in the list. The document referred to above as bearing the date of 1734 contains 224 foolscap pages, and is a recital of the events to that date in the controversy between France and Spain over the ownership of Texas. Another document, dated 1754, bearing upon the same subject, contains in 41 pages an account of the proceedings in council in Mexico on the subject of the removal of the French fort of Natchitoches across the line which, according to Spanish claim, separated Louisiana from Mexico. There is a bundle of papers about Magee, most of which, however, appear at first glance to be accounts and business letters. Another package, if one can believe the endorsement on the first page, refers, at least incidentally, to the mysterious expedition

headed by Aaron Burr. There are quite a number of census reports, which record not only the number of inhabitants of the place reported, but also give in detail the name, place of birth, occupation, property, live stock, etc., etc., of every man and woman, with the name, sex, and age of the children and slaves of those who had families.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the population settled along the San Antonio river was not reported in a body, but as broken up into five different organizations, each of which had its own local officers; for example, in 1790, the presidio of San Antonio de Bexar and the villa of San Fernando, reported together, contained 1151 souls; the mission of San José, 104; San Juan, 24; Espada, 46; Concepcion, 47; San Antonio de Valero, 48; making a total of 1420. The remaining four settlements of the province swelled the number to 2411, which was the total civilized population of Texas in that year.

The letters relative to the events of 1832 at Anahuac, Velasco and Nacogdoches may and probably will necessitate the revision and even the rewriting of that portion of our history. Another package which must throw great light on the history of our Revolution, and no doubt add much new matter, contains 300 letters from General Cos, covering the latter half of 1834 and up to November, 1835, while that officer was commandant general of the Eastern Internal States. These letters ought to reveal very fully the views, motives and plans of the government of Mexico relative to revolutionary Texas. The story of the planting of the American colonies is told in detail in the reports to the government from the empresarios and other officials, and in the copies of instructions, etc., issued by the authorities in San Antonio. There are scores of letters from Stephen F. Austin, and a great many from DeLeon and DeWitt. There are, besides, quantities of election returns, postoffice and revenue accounts, private letters, ayuntamiento records, reports of innumerable Indian troubles, petitions, records of trials, and many other documents of great interest and value.

One more instance will serve to show how completely and even minutely the record of the past has been preserved in these papers. The episode referred to in Texas history as the Fredonian war cannot be fully understood without a study of the documents deposited here. In the first place, there is quite a quantity of matter descrip-

tive of the state of affairs on the frontier before Edwards secured his grant—letters, reports, petitions and trials. Then, bearing directly on the subject, there are some sixty letters from Alcalde Norriss to the authorities in San Antonio; perhaps twice that number from Patricio de Torres and many from Sepulveda, Gaines, P. Ellis Bean, Mariano Casio, Chaplin, Benjamin Edwards and others. These give one a tolerably correct notion of affairs in and around Nacogdoches during these trying times. Then there are a great many letters from Austin on this subject, as well as petitions and resolutions of the settlers in various parts of his colony. These clearly indicate the attitude of that great leader and his sturdy frontiersmen toward the revolutionary movement. For the motives and plans of the government we turn to the blotters, or letter-books of the political chief, who was the head of the civil government of Texas. Into these blotters were copied all the letters that were sent out from the chief's office in San Antonio. For the year 1826 alone his correspondence with alcaldes and other minor officials under him filled a volume of 176 foolscap pages, a great deal of it relative to the Fredonian trouble. For the same year the correspondence of the same official with the Governor of the State of Coahuila and Texas filled 182 pages, a large part of which was concerning this matter. In these reports to the Governor the political chief usually stated the substance of letters received by him from the minor officials and others at Nacogdoches, and in this way lost or missing reports may in some degree be supplied. In addition to these ample sources of information there are a large number of letters on this subject from the commandant general of the Eastern Internal States to the commandant of Texas, a few letters and reports from the latter officer, and some, though little, correspondence between the government and the Indian tribes around Nacogdoches. Certainly one cannot complain of lack of information about the Fredonian war. I mention this incident not because the sources are more complete, but because I have had occasion to work through the matter relative to these few years. Very probably the papers treat most of the other topics mentioned above with an equal degree of completeness.

Bexar county has been fortunate in having county clerks who understood and appreciated the value of these papers. In consequence they have been well preserved; very few of them, if indeed

any, have suffered from moth or rat or weather, and nearly all are as legible now as the day they were filed.

Strange to say, neither the State nor the county has ever manifested any interest in the collection. It is without classification of any kind; documents of 1835 and 1750 may be found together without the slightest connection or relation between them. If one goes to these papers to investigate any subject, however small, he is forced to look through the entire collection, which is by no means a small undertaking. In the early part of this summer I spent nearly three weeks tediously turning over document after document, looking only at the date and address and laying aside those which I thought would throw light on the subject I had under consideration. And this is what confronts every one who wishes to make use of the material here collected. In the older States such negligence and indifference as to early history would be a State disgrace; certainly Texas, whose history is the pride of her people, ought to have this collection arranged so as to be easily and conveniently used by students and readers. I understand that some enterprising and patriotic gentleman of San Antonio once started a private subscription to have at least a rough classification made, but the work was too expensive for private funds. Even the county cannot be expected to do it. It is a duty incumbent on the State.

What is necessary to make this a working collection? Money, scholarship and such work as can proceed only from an enthusiastic interest in the history of Texas. A thorough classification should be made, and then a good index. Some idea of what a stupendous undertaking this would be may be had by dividing 350,000, a moderate estimate of the number of pages in the collection, by the number which would represent an average day's reading. If the papers were in print and in the English language, it would require three or four years to even read them through. To master their contents and classify them by subjects would require a much longer time. After the classification is completed, the papers should be bound for greater safety and for convenient use. Then a page for page translation should be made, before Texas, proud of her history, can claim to have provided for the proper preservation of a very important portion of the sources of that history. Many other States have gone much further than this and have had such records printed.

LESTER G. BUGBEE.

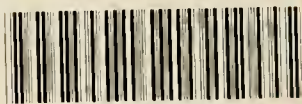
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